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ABSTRACT

The paper suggests rationales and practical procedures for improving student learning skills in high school social studies courses. A major objective is to help classroom teachers minimize problems brought about by the mismatch between student capabilities and program demands. It is hypothesized that secondary social studies teachers have not usually had formal training in teaching the basic mathematics and reading skills required for comprehending textbook material. To rectify these deficiencies in teacher training, the document presents tips on assessing student reading ability, determining textbook readability, teaching content vocabulary, providing structure to reading assignments through directed activities, and helping students comprehend content presented through mathematics. Included in the descriptions of each of these procedures are background information, formulas used to calculate various ability ranges, vocabulary definitions, suggested reading, and pointers on specific learning problems of which teachers should be aware. Information is presented in textual form and is illustrated by means of graphs, charts, pictographs, tables, and scale drawings. (Author/DB)

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THE BASICS

BRIDGES TO SUCCESS IN SOCIAL STUDIES

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THE BASICS

BRIDGES TO SUCCESS IN SOCIAL STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

Balance in teaching refers to the match between student capabilities and program demands. The concept may be pictured as a balance beam (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Weight must be equally distributed on both ends of a balance beam for balance to occur. In teaching, program demands must equal (or be matched to) a student's capabilities for learning to occur. If the educational program demands too little, students under-achieve. If program demands exceed students' capabilities, students often fail.

It has been aptly said that the first three years of his school career, a child goes to school to learn to read; thereafter, he reads to learn. During the early years of a child's school life, heavy emphasis is placed on teaching him/her to read, write, and do arithmetic--the basic tools he/she will need for future learning. By the time these children enter junior and senior high school, it is assumed they can use these tools to learn other subjects.

Social studies teachers are all too familiar with the fallacy of this assumption. Regardless of how well the teacher knows and can teach social studies content, many students fail (and dislike) these subjects. Few subjects depend more heavily on printed materials as the medium of instruction. Command of the basics is basic to success in the social studies. Yet, secondary age students are often not proficient enough in basic skills to succeed in social studies. They also vary widely in their abilities. In any given classroom, students may be functioning all the way from second to fourteenth-year levels in reading and math.

Teachers create the balance in the teaching-learning interaction. In all but a small number of cases, students can learn. Whether they learn, according to educational psychologists, depends on the quality of their instruction (Bloom, Hastings, and Madares,1971).

The quality of instruction can be described as the balance between program demands and student capabilities. Teachers control this balance. To create balance, a social studies teacher must not only know his/her subject field and how to teach it. He/she must also be an educational diagnostician, capable of assessing students' basic learning equipment and determining the demands which

instructional materials and processes will impose on that equipment. If, in evaluating the interaction between the two, the teacher discovers imbalance, he/she must be capable of restoring balance to the teaching-learning environment. In most cases, this means teachers of social studies must become teachers of the basic skills subjects as well.

This presentation is designed to help you assess the givens in your classroom--student capabilities and program demands--and help you establish balance between the two.

ASSESSING THE GIVENS IN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Student Abilities

One of the important "givens" in any classroom is the range of achievement abilities that exist among class members. It is also known that the higher the grade level the wider the range. Burmeister (1974) provides a formula whereby a teacher can predict ability range for an average classroom:

AR = 2/3 of CA

AR = Ability Range
CA = Chronological Age (where CA equals the grade in school plus 5.2)

If the above formula is used to calculate the ability range of an eleventh grade class, one will quickly see that the range is about 10 school years which means that the average classroom of eleventh graders will have students with abilities as low as 6th grade and as high as beginning graduate school.

These differences, staggering as they may be, are compounded by the fact that textbooks do not attempt to accommodate these differences. The problem becomes more serious due to the fact that textbooks have readabilities considerably higher than the grade for which they were designed. This will be illustrated later in the paper.

In addition to the range of abilities within a class, individual students are faced with specific reading disabilities that hinder their decoding of the printed page and prevent getting past the surface structure of print (mechanical skills) into the deep structure or meaning--the essence of reading. These students often have poor word attack skills to recode (pronounce) difficult or unknown vocabulary and have a low level of instant recognition ability. These mechanical barriers create "sloppy" reading behavior and run interference for the ultimate purpose of reading--understanding, remembering, relating, and applying what is read.

Readability

Readability can be basically defined as a relative estimate of the reading difficulty level of printed discourse. The concept of readability was developed by journalists and is based upon two assumptions: (1) the short word is easier to read than the long word, and (2) the short sentence is easier to read than

the long sentence. Although the concept of readability has inherent weaknesses, the use of a readability formula will provide the classroom teacher an estimate of the reading difficulty of the textbook which is being used in class.

A widely used readability formula was developed by Edward Fry (1972, 1977). Based upon the average number of sentences and the average number of syllables per hundred words, the Fry formula provides a reliable measure of the reading difficulty of written materials. Procedures for employing the Fry formula and the Fry Readability Graph are found in Appendix A.

The Fry Readability formula was used with Chapter 9, "The Right to Vote and Voter Behavior," of Magruder's American Government (McClenaghan, 1977). This text is one of the most widely used books in teaching civics. The results of the readability check indicate that the average readability of the chapter is about 14.5 (college sophomore level). Unfortunately, this result is typical of secondary content area textbooks.

Vocabulary Load

As was found in the previous section, readability of a textbook must be an important consideration in selecting texts. Unfortunately one will have to look a long way to find a textbook in the social studies (or any subject for that matter) that is written with language demands comparable to the skills of the students in that grade. While sentence length increases difficulty, vocabulary affects readability even more significantly. There are three vocabularies to be discussed here: (1) high frequency vocabulary which is common to all print; (2) words that are difficult because they are long or have irregular grapheme-phoneme patterns; and (3) words, regardless of length, that may have syntactic and/or semantic connotations of an unusual or unlikely nature.

The high frequency vocabulary is a concern of all teachers as this basic vocabulary is not unique to a context area but important to all areas and found in all print (Dolch, 1939; Fry, 1977; Wepman, 1969; Stetson, 1978, et al). Elementary and special education teachers have always considered these words most basic and usually go to great pains to teach these words systematically. It is known that students with reading difficulties often become "stumped" on these simple words of the language because each looks so much like another and because they often have irregular grapheme-phoneme patterns.

Other difficult words unique to a content area teacher must be identified by that teacher and taught in a systematic manner if the student is to bridge the gap between his abilities and the demands of the text. Examples of words which are long or have meaning uniqueness are listed below. These have been taken directly from the chapter entitled "The Right to Vote and Voter Behavior" in Magruder's American Government.

representatives
through the exercise of suffrage
shakes the turret of the land
governmental system
broadening of the electorate
suffrage qualifications
prohibit transients
fraudulent voting
abandonment

prohibition of the denial of the right to vote
has been abridged
coerce another
constitutionality
gubernatorial
scruples
definitive certainty
political socialization
demographic factors

It is obvious from the above words that not only are many words long but used in a critical sense within the sentence that will require semantic alertness beyond the abilities of the average student. Because the text does exist and will be used in a class, the teacher must pay attention to this vocabulary in order to bridge the gap between student abilities and textbook demands.

Assessing the Match Between Student Abilities and Text Requirements

Most content teachers are confronted with one textbook whose readability may be well above even the anticipated range of abilities of students. Content teachers need to know if their students are comprehending the text on an independent, instructional, or frustrational level. These levels (Kilgallon, 1942; Betts,1946) indicate the degree of comprehension the students exhibit when reading. A time-efficient method of assessing student abilities to comprehend and effectively use the text is required because the secondary teacher simply does not have the time to systematically and individually assess 150 students. The silent group informal inventory is both easy to develop and easy to administer.

One component of the informal inventory is the determination of the level at which students comprehend the text. Ideally, students would read textual material at either an independent level which requires no instructional aid or at an instructional level which requires some instructional guidance. Unfortunately, many students will be reading at a frustrational level; the material will be only minimally understood even with maximum instructional guidance.

To assess student ability to comprehend the text, the content teacher should select a passage (about one page) to be read silently and should develop text-bound questions which will assess immediately recall of information presented in the passage. Questions should not be such that general knowledge or the experiential base of the reader would allow a correct response. After silently reading the passage, the reader should be able to answer 70-75% of the questions correctly. If not, the passage is at a frustrational level; the student will not be able to use the text effectively as a source of information. Appendix B presents a silent inventory developed from Chapter 11 of Magruder's American Government.

The second component of the informal inventory assesses the students' ability to use the text effectively. Teachers in all content areas should be aware of another major obstacle confronting students attempting to use a textbook--the organization of the book. Most students have learned to read through the use of basal programs in elementary schools. Over 95% of the primary grades and over 80% of the intermediate grades in elementary schools in the United States use basal programs (Chall, 1967). Basal programs consist of a sequence of books of increasing difficulty with controlled selection and introduction of vocabulary. The content of the stories is primarily narrative in style and usually familiar

to children. Content area textbooks, however, require specialized reading skills because style and organizational patterns vary from text to text.

Social studies texts generally use one of seven different organizational patterns identified by Robinson (1974). In addition to organizational patterns which differ from the narrative orientation of basal readers, textbooks also include a variety of other textual "oddities" for the naive content area reader: indices, footnotes, maps, charts, graphs. Although students may be able cognitively to identify the use of these textbooks components, they may not be able to use them effectively. The skills required for interacting with textbook information, using the table of contents and index efficiently, or for making inferences from tables, charts, or graphs do not automatically transfer from general reading comprehension. Using a text effectively necessitates the identification, assessment, and if necessary the teaching of the specific skills needed for comprehending the text.

After identifying the skills required for effective use of the text, the content teacher is responsible for assessing student capabilities. An informal inventory can be easily developed which tests student abilities. (Appendix B provides a sample inventory based on the table of contents and index from the Magruder's American Government.

Mathematical Traps

There a number of mathematical traps in the social studies curriculum. Mathematical terms, such as ratio, percent, century, estimate and numerous are often essential to understanding the concept or idea that is being presented. Numerals and/or number words like 2.5 billion, two and one-half billion, two billion, five hundred million, and one quarter trillion are unavoidable in much of the social studies. Population figures and the national debt are but a few examples of their use.

Tables are often a mathematical trap. They are used to make comparisons when numbers are involved. For example, the table in Figure 2 shows the number of boxes of candy that five band members sold.

Name of Children	Number of Candy Sales
Bob	18
Mary	20
Jim	28
Lois	32
Mike	36

Figure 2

Graphs are illustrations of tables and can also be mathematical traps. There are four types of graphs: bar, line, circle and pictographs. Graphs present abstract information in a pictorial form making it more understandable. However, caution should be exercised when using and interpreting graphs because changing the scale will yield a different picture. The bar graphs on the following page illustrate this.

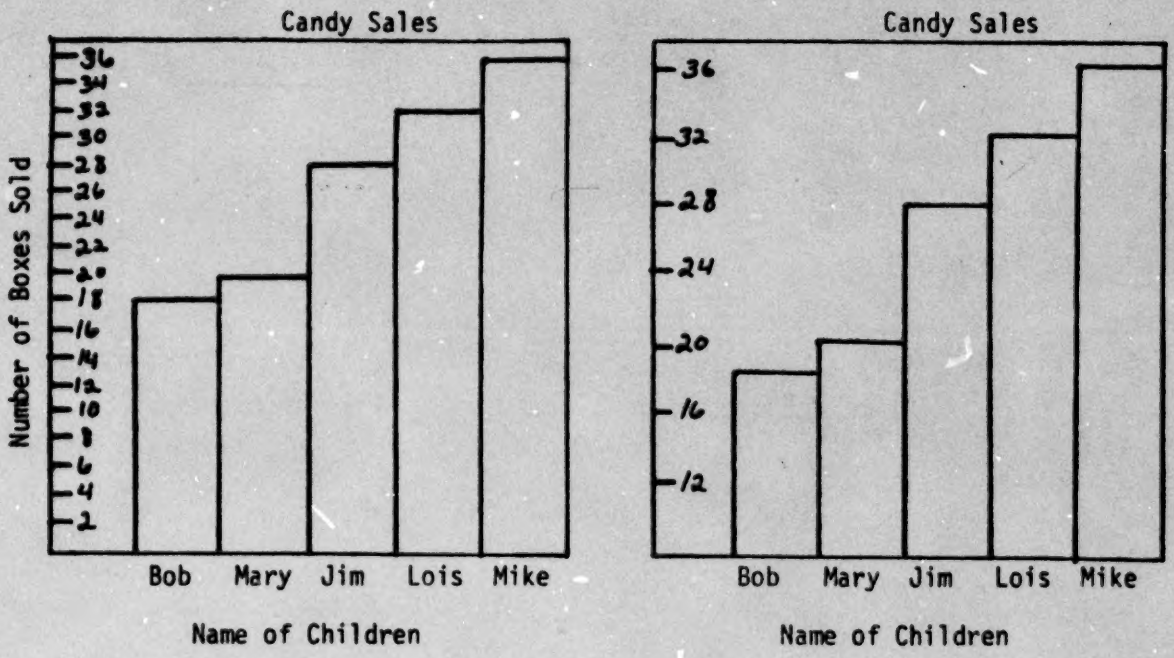


Figure 3

Line graphs are conversions of bar graphs to line representations. Again changing the interval gives a different view of the data. The following line graphs illustrate this point.

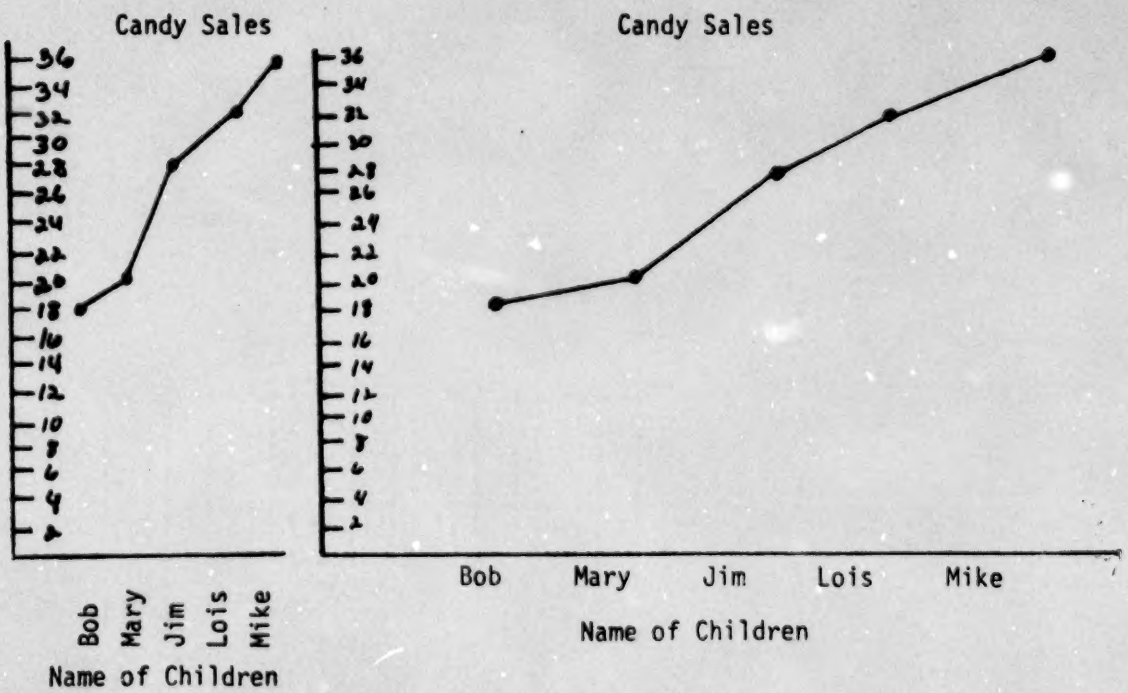


Figure 4

Line graphs are more abstract than bar graphs and tend to be a little more difficult to interpret. However, there are some data that are better presented with a line graph. For example, when three types of information are graphed it is best to use a line graph.

Circle graphs or pie graphs are very useful illustrations and are probably the easiest graph to understand. They are more difficult to construct because the quantities being compared must be converted to percentages and that percentage equated to a number of degrees in the circle (one percent equals 3.6 degrees). When a small percent exists, the circle graph tends to lose some of its effectiveness. The following example from page 164 in Magruder's American Government illustrates that point.

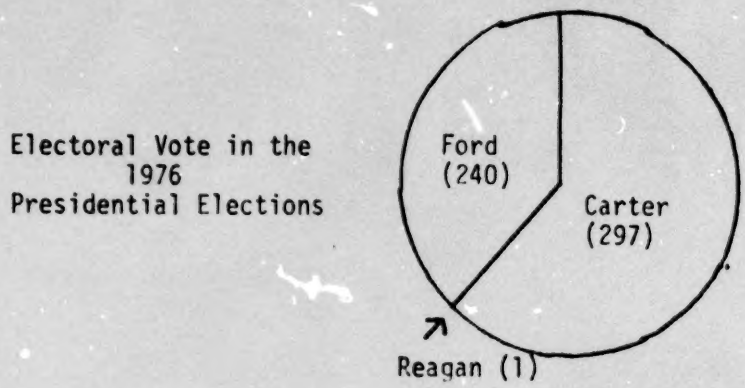


Figure 5

Pictographs are eye catching and useful illustrations. They do not have the accuracy of the other graphs. The pictograph on the following page illustrates that point.

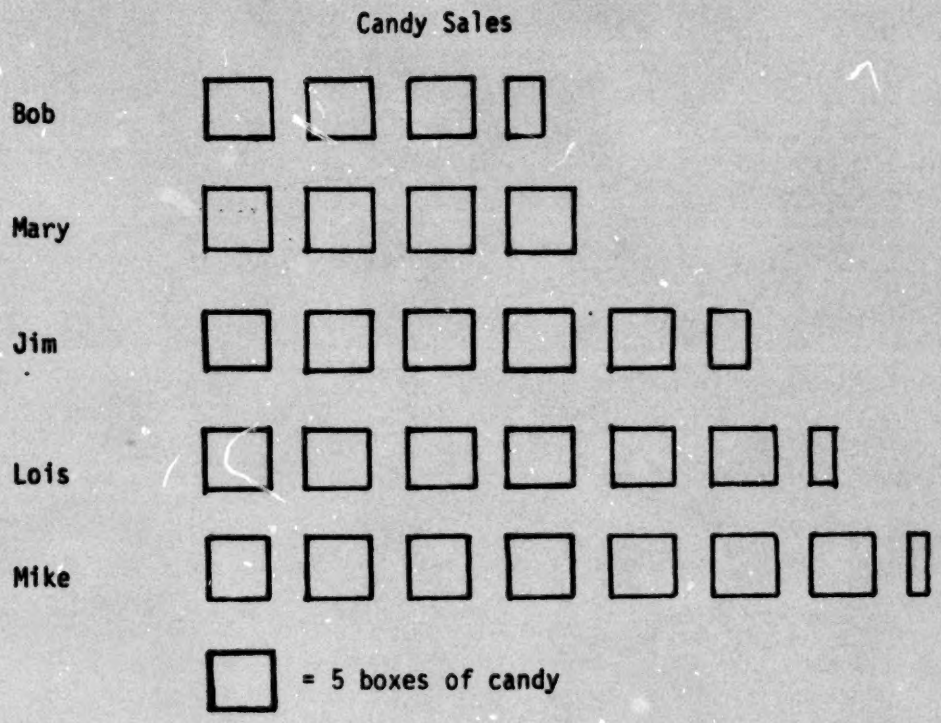


Figure 6

Scale drawings are frequently used in the social studies. A map is a prime example of a scale drawing. It is a drawing that maintains the same ratio as the actual locations. Students are often required to construct and/or use maps in social studies; thus it is necessary for them to understand ratio and how a small unit of measure can represent a much larger unit.

Social studies materials often contain a great many mathematical traps. These traps make it even more difficult for many students to achieve in social studies. For example, in Magruder's American Government the chapter entitled "The Right to Vote and Voter Behavior" contains the following mathematical traps:

page 153, the numeral 150,000,000 and the mathematical term mid-century

page 157, a scale drawing and bar graph

page 161, a table

page 164, a scale drawing, a circle graph, and a bar graph

page 165, a bar graph and a line graph

Mathematics is a useful aid to understanding social studies content. Some students have no difficulty understanding materials presented in this fashion.

For those students who cannot interpret mathematical terms and constructs, however, mathematics is but one more obstacle standing in the way of their success in social studies.

ESTABLISHING BALANCE IN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Vocabulary

Formal teaching of content vocabulary is one of at least two ways to aid the poor achiever in social studies. The following steps can be taken:

1. Prior to beginning a chapter, the teacher looks over the chapter to identify difficult words or words which have special or unusual meaning.

2. Each word is printed on a sentence strip or placard so that the word is printed, the word is used in a phrase or short sentence (preferably from the textbook), and a definition is provided if necessary.

   transient

   Transients are persons within the United States for a limited time and for a specific purpose.

3. Once the posters are prepared, the teacher introduces the chapter, provides an overview (discussed later), and spends time discussing some of the critical vocabulary that will be encountered within the chapter. During the discussion, these problem words are pronounced, spelled, and a discussion is allowed if appropriate.

4. After the initial introduction of the problem vocabulary, the placards are displayed throughout the room in conspicuous places where they remain throughout the unit or chapter.

5. Each time the terms are encountered through the chapter, the teacher points out that problem word and calls the students' attention to that word. When students are given writing assignments they are encouraged to use the vocabulary in their writing and to study the word in more detail should they have problems.

6. The placards are taken down only at the culmination of the unit or when the final test is administered and the test includes knowledge of those difficult concepts.

Directed Reading Activity

The Directed Reading Activity (DRA) is a lesson plan model which can be effectively used by any content area teacher for reducing the mismatch between student reading abilities and textbook reading requirements. The DRA consists of five steps which should be incorporated into reading assignments. The steps

are intended as general guides. Steps one and two are of extreme importance and require teacher knowledge of both the selection and students' abilities. Preparing the student to read and establishing a framework for reading should facilitate comprehension by providing advanced organizers (Gagne, 1977). Research suggests that questions provided before reading appear to control comprehension by establishing goals for the reader that involve problem solving skills (Frase, 1970).

A unique component of the DRA is the structural overview. The overview is of particular utility to the student whose reading achievement is below the textual requirements. Before encountering the literal propositions, the reader is prepared conceptually and organizationally. In essence, the overview acts as an advanced organizer by providing the reader with a graphic representation of the organization of the selection to be encountered.

To prevent the "read Chapter 9 for tomorrow" assignments and to increase comprehension, the following outline of the Directed Reading Activity should be used:

(i) *prepare the students for reading:* Review or relate previous chapters, sequences of events, or trends which are integral to understanding the selection to be read. How does this information relate to the current assignment? Review or introduce vocabulary or concepts which are prerequisite to the intended assignment.

(ii) *establish purposes, method, and rate for reading the selection:* Establish expectations for students in their reading. Are students reading for main ideas, to recall specific details, or for causes and effects? Provide prereading questions which mirror your objectives. How should the selection be read? Should it be skimmed and then reread for details? Will one reading suffice? Finally, the teacher should help the students determine the appropriate rate for their reading which will be a function of the established goals. For example, reading for details requires a slower rate than reading for general trends.

(iii) *read the selection* guided by established goals, method, and rate.

(iv) *discuss the selection* in terms of the established goals and questions.

(v) *extend the reading* by utilizing the new information in an instructional activity, or relating to the new concepts to those already established.

(Parsons and Tomas, 1978)

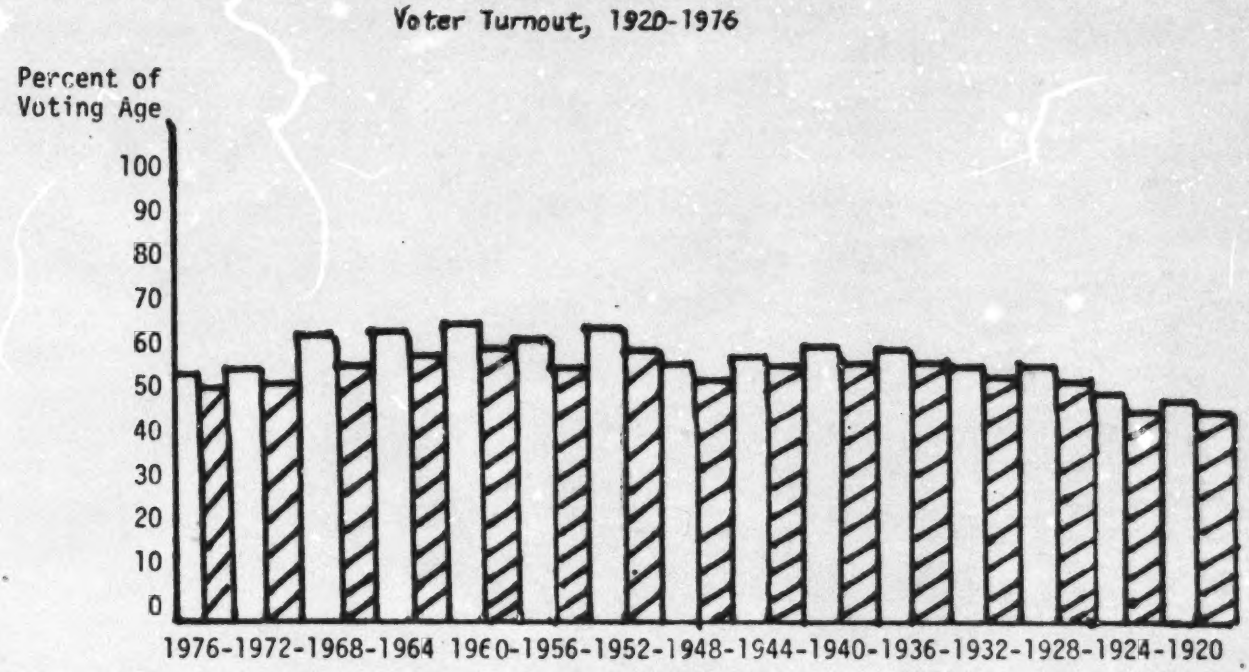
Appendix C presents vocabulary, objectives, and prereading questions and structural overview appropriate for the first half of Chapter 9, "The Right to Vote and Voting Behaviors."

Overcoming Mathematical Traps in Social Studies

There is an old adage that "people learn to do by doing." The way to balance the beam for the mathematical traps is to use the traps as an instructional aid. Students should be able to convert a table to a graph. They will better understand the principles involved in graphing after they have constructed a few

graphs. For example, when teaching Chapter 9 in Magruder's American Government the Table on page 161 could be used to construct a graph. This will help students better understand the table as well as present the data in another way.

Figure 7 shows how some of the data from the table would look on a bar graph.



NOTE: Plain bars represent votes cast for president and striped bars represent votes cast for U.S. representatives

Figure 7

When reviewing the graph several things become apparent. For example: the percent voting for president always exceeds the percent voting for representatives; only 50 to 60 percent of the population vote in any given year; and a lesser percentage voted in 76 or 72 than in the preceding five elections. Questions of what can be asked about each of these observations, thus serving as a stimulus for discussion and further exploration of the topic.

The data that have been presented on a bar graph can also be presented on a line graph. In some instances, it is useful to use both types of graphs. You will note the use of a line graph on page 165 in Magruder's American Government. This graph apparently uses data from the table on page 161. It might be interesting to make a line graph of the data and compare it with the one on page 165. One question that may evolve the comparison is, "What assumptions were made about the presidential vote in the years when there was not a presidential election?"

Most mathematical traps are not traps in the truest sense of the term. In fact, if dealt with properly, they can be aids to understanding. They may well be the thing that balances the curriculum for the learner.

SUMMARY

It should be obvious by now that teachers and students face many obstacles in social studies classrooms. Teachers must deal with the wide range of abilities which students bring to the classroom. At the same, time, the instructional materials available to them are often ill suited to the ability levels of their students. In most cases, teachers are the only hope many students have of bridging the gap between what they can do and what school programs demand. The teacher becomes the bridge to success for most students.

Bridging the gap requires that social studies teachers be teachers of the basics as well. Yet most secondary social studies teachers have not had formal training in the teaching of mathematics and language arts. Despite this, there are things which secondary teachers can do to help students. Formal teaching of content vocabulary, providing structure to reading through the Directed Reading Activity, and helping students better understand content presented through mathematics are simple procedures to follow. They require little if any special material or equipment. Using these procedures, a teacher can considerably increase many students' opportunities to learn in social studies. The investment a teacher makes in planning and working with students in these ways can have a big pay-off. Teachers can make the difference in establishing balance between student capabilities and program demands.

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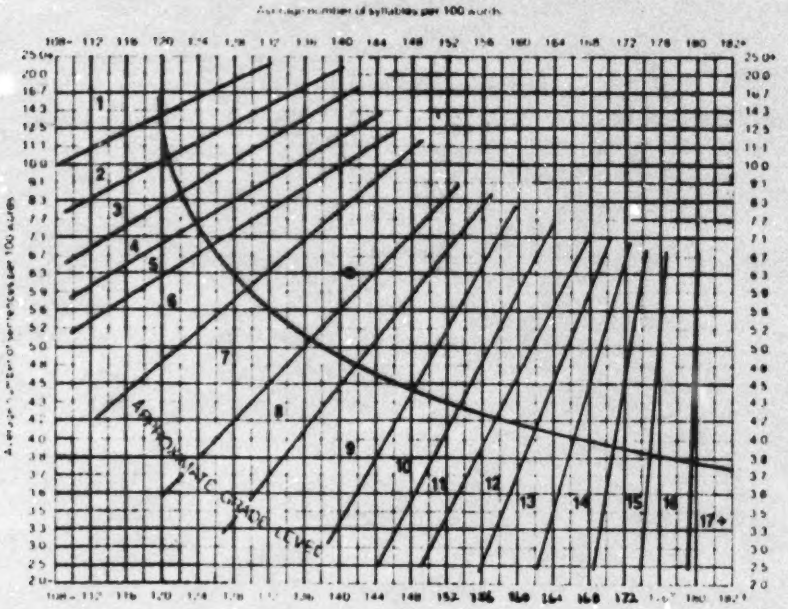
APPENDIX A

Figure 2

GRAPH FOR ESTIMATING READABILITY – EXTENDED

by Edward Fry, Rutgers University Reading Center, New Brunswick, N.J. 08904



Expanded Directions for Working Readability Graph

1. Randomly select three (3) sample passages and count out exactly 100 words each, beginning with the beginning of a sentence. Do count proper nouns, initializations, and numerals.
2. Count the number of sentences in the hundred words, estimating length of the fraction of the last sentence to the nearest one-tenth.
3. Count the total number of syllables in the 100-word passage. If you don't have a hand counter available, an easy way is to simply put a mark above every syllable over one in each word, then when you get to the end of the passage, count the number of marks and add 100. Small calculators can also be used as counters by pushing numeral 1, then push the + sign for each word or syllable when counting.
4. Enter graph with *average* sentence length and *average* number of syllables; plot dot where the two lines intersect. Area where dot is plotted will give you the approximate grade level.
5. If a great deal of variability is found in syllable count or sentence count, putting more samples into the average is desirable.
6. A word is defined as a group of symbols with a space on either side; thus, *Joe*, *IRA*, *1945*, and & are each one word.
7. A syllable is defined as a phonetic syllable. Generally, there are as many syllables as vowel sounds. For example, *stopped* is one syllable and *wanted* is two syllables. When counting syllables for numerals and initializations, count one syllable for each symbol. For example, *1945* is four syllables, *IRA* is three syllables, and & is one syllable.

Note: This "extended graph" does not outmode or render the earlier (1968) version inoperative or inaccurate; it is an extension. (REPRODUCTION PERMITTED—NO COPYRIGHT)

APPENDIX B

TEXTBOOK

INFORMAL READING INVENTORY

(Table of Contents)

1. In which chapter and on what pages would you find a discussion of the basic principles involved in the writing of the United States Constitution?

   Chapter title:_____

   page:_____

I

2. On what pages would you find information on the marketing activities of the Department of Agriculture?

   pages:_____

3. List all the pages in this book where information could be found concerning the Bay of Pigs invasion.

N

   pages:_____

4. List all the pages in which information could be found about the Bill of Rights.

   pages:_____

D

5. On what pages would you find information on coinage in the United States?

   pages:_____

6. Where would you locate the quote by James Bryce?

   page:_____

E

7. On what pages would you find information on the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training?

   pages:_____

8. Where would you locate information on the 12th article of the United States Constitution?

   pages:_____

9. On page 153, the text states that the 19th Amendment prohibits "the denial of the right to vote on the grounds of sex." Does this amendment then specifically guarantee the right to vote to women?

X

   YES_____ NO _____

10. Read the section, "Suffrage and the Constitution," found on pages 153-154. Read this section silently. You will be asked to answer a series of factual questions when you have finished reading.

    a. Why was the establishment of suffrage qualifications left largely to the States in the Constitution?

    b. Name one long-term trend that has affected the development of suffrage.

    c. What is meant by the phrase "broadening the electorate"?

    d. What was the impact of the Hill v. Stone decision in 1975?

    e. Under what conditions may a state establish suffrage qualifications?

    f. What was the impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965?

    g. What does the word "disfranchise? mean?

APPENDIX C

DIRECTED READING ACTIVITY FOR "THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND VOTER BEHAVIOR"

VOCABULARY

suffrage 152 vs citizenship

right vs privilege vs duty

political vs civil right 152

disfranchisement 153

article/section/clause 153

alien/naturalized 154

residence 154

apathy 155

transient 155

fraudulent 156

"know-nothing" 156

literacy 156

poll tax 157

coerce 158

finis 158

language minority 160

OBJECTIVES

The student will:

1. explain the difference between a civil right and a political right and classify into which category suffrage falls,
2. identify and explain five major efforts at broadening the suffrage base,
3. list and explain current voting qualifications in his/her state,

4. correctly determine eligibility to vote when given hypothetical situations regarding voting right restrictions,

5. explain why Congressional Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were necessary to implement the guarantees of the 15th Amendment, and

6. evaluate the effectiveness of Congressional Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in eliminating violations of voter rights.

QUESTIONS

1. Voting is a political right. What is the difference between a "civil right" and a "political right"?

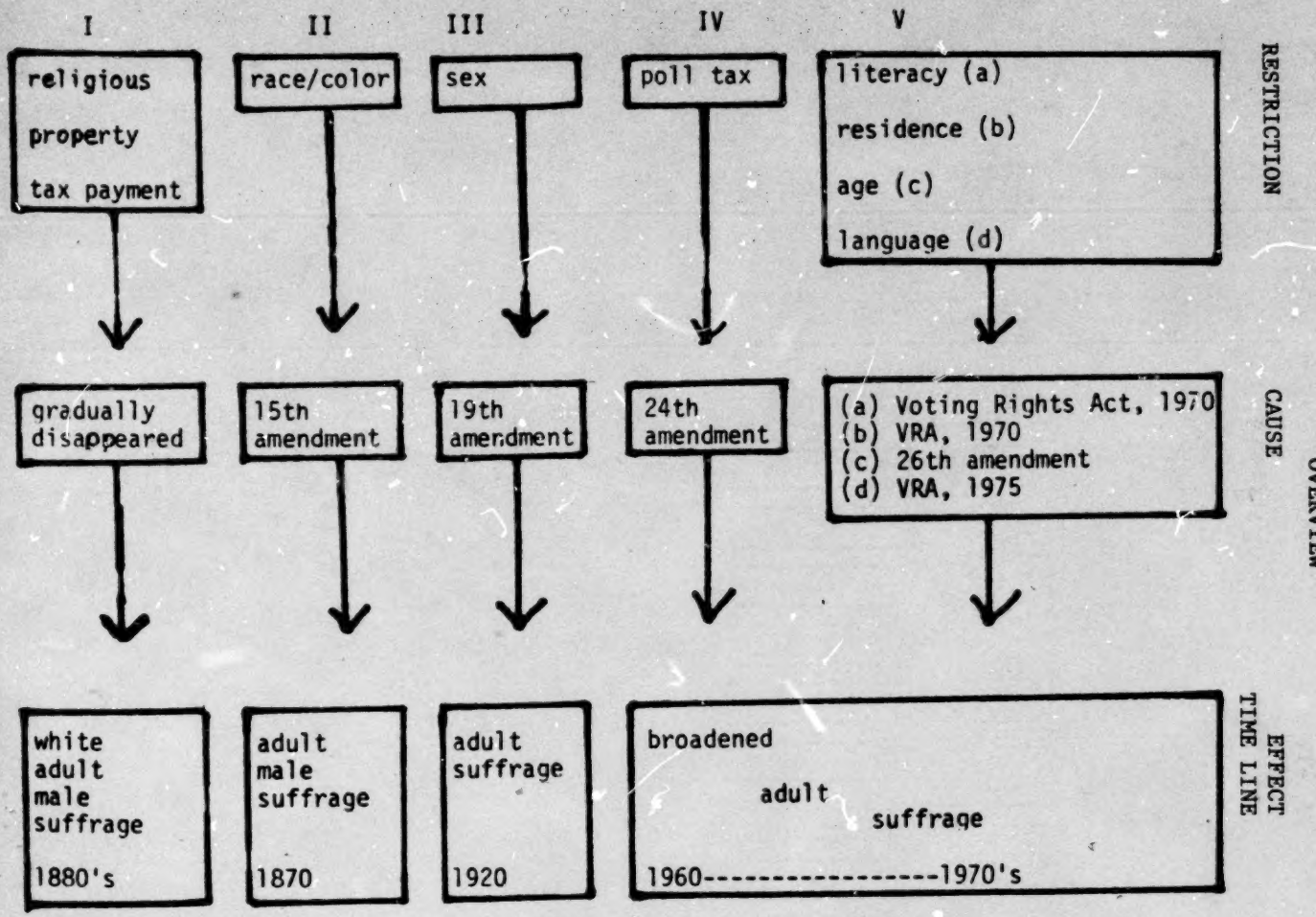
2. Identify and explain five major efforts at broadening suffrage.

3. Would it be legal today for a state to establish seventeen as the voting age for elections in that state? Why/why not?

4. You are a nineteen-year-old college student living in College Town for two months. After one year, you know you will be transferring to the University in University City. Can you legally vote next month in a College Town city election which will have effects on the town for years to come? Explain.

5. List and explain current voting qualifications in your state.

6. The 15th Amendment was ratified many years ago. Why has it been necessary for Congress to enact four Civil Rights Acts and three Voting Rights Acts to implement the guarantees of the 15th? How effective have these acts been in eliminating violations of voters' rights?


I
II
III
IV
V
religious
property
tax payment
race/color
sex
poll tax
literacy (a)
residence (b)
age (c)
language (d)
RESTRICTION
gradually disappeared
15th amendment
19th amendment
24th amendment
(a) Voting Rights Act, 1970
(b) VRA, 1970
(c) 26th amendment
(d) VRA, 1975
CAUSE
white adult male suffrage
1880's
adult male suffrage
1870
adult suffrage
1920
broadened adult suffrage
1960----------1970's
EFFECT
TIME LINE
OVERVIEW